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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study examined the interdependence and synergism of multiple symbol systems of first grade writers. Subjects, four first grade students, were followed as they engaged in playful literacy--composing with blocks, clay, shadow puppets, tissue paper collage, drawing, and written and spoken words. "Thick description" was used to record the stories of the individual children. Findings suggest that an exclusively verbal conception of language arts limits expressive potential in general, and limits writing development in particular. Findings also suggest the need to rethink what counts as "literacy." (RS)

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PLAYFUL LITERACY: FIRST GRADERS AS MEANING MAKERS ACROSS THE LITERACIES OF PLAY, THE CREATIVE ARTS, AND THE LANGUAGE ARTS

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This year-long ethnographic study of first grade writers examines the interdependence and synergism of multiple symbol systems. Historically, language arts studies have been verbocentric. In contrast, this study argues that an exclusively verbal conception of language arts limits expressive potential in general, and in particular, limits writing development.

Nearly a decade ago, Janet Emig asked writing researchers, "...for the process of writing, what is truly organic?" Playful Literacy explores that question by following four first grade thinkers as they compose with blocks, with clay, with shadow puppets, with tissue paper collage, with drawing, as well as with written and spoken words.

Children's oral language, their idiosyncratic use of time and space in the classroom, as well as their play and artmaking all suggest dynamic interrelationships. My conceptual model of this approach looks like this:

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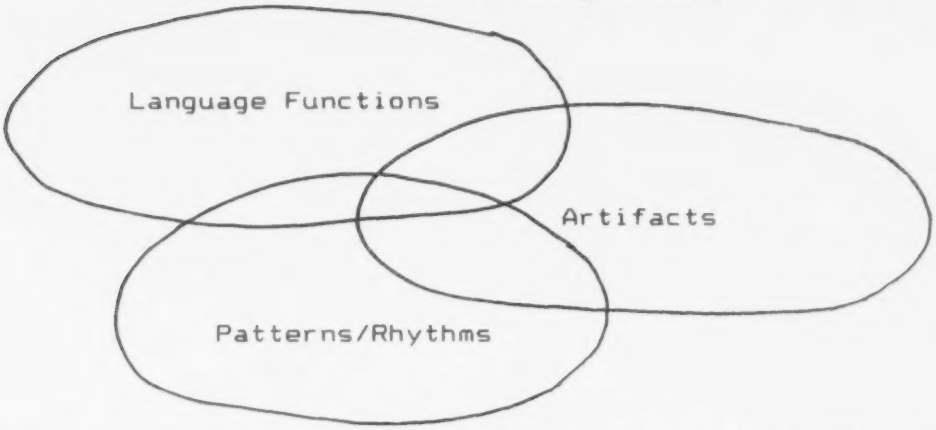
Dynamic Levels of Meaning Making



Throughout the study, I imagined myself viewing the child through all three lenses at any one time and I asked: How is s/he using language? What is s/he trying to make? How is s/he using time and space to do it?

Thus, I watched and recorded the stories of individual children in "thick description." In the process, I came close to understanding "story" from their visions in chapter two, I interpreted their play as text in chapter three, and I explored their literate/aesthetic sensibilities in chapter four. This experience, however, was largely a consequence of how the teacher, Chris Gaudet, reconceived time, space, and possibility inside her first grade classroom.

Somewhat surprisingly, even more compelling than the individual "symbolic signatures" that came clear, are the characteristics of this classroom and their implications. Thus, issues even more fundamental than individual configurations of meaning making--issues that at least need co-exist with questions of how young children learn to mean in school, issues that enable

or inhibit unique meaning making--became the dominant strand of this study.

Consequently, Playful Literacy challenges the time-honored "basics" and asks educators to rethink "literacies." Following are the understandings that the study suggests:

* The Language Arts share characteristics of Art in general.
* The classroom can be compared to an expressive, living organism, just as language can be compared to an expressive, living thing.
* Learning how to mean in specific school communities is the "basic curriculum" for first graders.
* "Child-centered" can be a suspect term, an alias for a multitude of questionable practices.
* Literacy learning is systemic and cooperative: Children coopt eclectic meaning-making systems to reach their expressive goals.
* The "New Basics" for Literacy are more fundamental than sound-symbol correspondence, the word, or any discrete verbal features.
* Questions about literacy ultimately embrace questions of learning and thinking.
* Relations of power are ubiquitous, even overt in a study that admits to being advocacy.

The Language Arts Share Characteristics of Art

Philosophical domain distinctions between the Language Arts and Art are not relevant here. What is relevant is that both domains -- Language Arts and Art -- exhibit essential qualities: Both the Language Arts and Art intend meaning. Both have emotional resonance. Both invite immersion. Both strain to make personal forms public. Both take initiative, imagination, passion, and time. Both invite critique of one's work in relation to others'. Both incite wonder.

Thus, it is appropriate, even essential, to approach the Language Arts in aesthetic ways both in our classroom practices and our assessments. John Dewey (1934), perhaps the single educator most responsible for process education, claimed that Americans confuse objective standards and objective judgment. The first conventionally connotes a numerical accounting; the other does not.

The qualities shared by the Language Arts and Art resist traditional measurement, though in a passionate efficiency, we've scurried about measuring what we could: number of correct verb tenses, number of correct capitalizations, and the like. Not coincidentally, of course, we've then doggedly pursued/taught what we could measure frequently at the expense of other, admittedly elusive, "virtual things." As Tamara, my young, wise piano

teacher puts it, "Judy, the notes are in black...the music is in the spaces." So, too, with much literate music.

Too many Language Arts studies and practitioners have been seduced by epiphenomena, drugged by surface paraphrenalia. Instead, Chris and I were trying develop artistic eyes in ourselves, to see in children's actions qualities that may be critical for growing literate capacities. We learned through trial and error that no stock form could serve us well. For example, we frustrated ourselves for weeks trying to capture separate evaluative formats/forms/frames for clay work, for shadow play, for collage making. We then realized that we were trapping ourselves into behaviors that were highly imitative of other evaluative schemes we'd seen. Instead, we decided to learn new ways to describe child actions that we experienced as rich with literate/artistic possibility.

Now, we look for qualities or sensibilities in the children that appear to contribute to meaning making in general, and in the Language Arts and Art in particular. These qualities will be considered shortly as "the new basics."

The Classroom as Expressive Organism

The classroom can be compared to an expressive, living organism just as verbal language can. Like language, 1G exists to give expression to ideas--ideas of the culture at

large, of communities within the classroom, and of individuals. (Clearly, 1G exists to express ideas in non-verbal ways, however this discussion focuses on its specifically linguistic aspects.) If one accepts the analogy between the classroom and language, it is appropriate and powerful to describe 1G in linguistic terminology.

Linguists have isolated seven functional uses of language: Instrumental, "I want;" Regulatory, "Do as I tell you;" Interactional, "Me and you;" Personal, "Here I come;" Heuristic, "Tell me why?;" Imaginative, "Let's pretend!;" and Informative, "I've got something to tell you" (Halliday 1973, 57-58). Given this range of functions, the question lurks: Does the classroom regularly honor all language functions?

Because Chris systemmatically schedules time for talk before, after, and during most classroom ventures, every language use is invited througout the day. (Though I suspect all language functions occur within the unofficial curriculum -- say in whispered talk, note passing, and the like in 1G, talk is officially validated most times. To be sure, children still discover unofficial ways to use language!)

Coding the one hundred and thirty four child statements for one typical forty minute block play session demonstrates a close correspondence, both in uses and frequencies per

use, that Halliday identifies as typical for young children using language to learn language. Specifically, the six boys in one block play event used Regulatory language forty-six percent of the time, they used Interactional/Imaginative language thirty-three percent of the time, and they used Representational language nineteen percent of the time. Instrumental and Heuristic language each represented thirteen percent of the boys' transactions, and Personal language functions served three percent of their exchanges.

This admittedly tedious scheme suggests that the conditions most natural for child language growth are alive and well in this classroom if one accepts this slice of behavior as typical, as Chris and I do. She capitalizes on children's natural ways with language. Talk inside even more "officially academic" events shares characteristics similar to this play event simply because children continue to converse, in their own ways, throughout the school day.

Form follows function. In the case of language, children figure ways to figure out language as the classroom gives them the chance. I question any school day that systemmatically ignores whole ranges of language functions. Literacy curricula need nurture linguistic flexibility, optional ways to use language to get things done. By freeing up certain times for talk in and around doings during the school day, children flex their different linguistic muscles.

Learning How to Mean in School Communities

Because the point of this study was to document children's eclectic approaches to literacy, especially writing, I focused on children struggling to make meaning in print. At the same time, because I was watching children across contexts, I was bombarded by visions of children struggling equally to mean in the different communities within the first grade.

Learning how to mean in the different school communities is first graders' curriculum and each child specializes, in a sense, in particularly personal purposes. It appeared that more or less willingly, the case study children added the reading/writing community to their repertoires, alongside play communities like the block community, their tablemates' community, and collaborative art communities.

No two communities nor children exhibited identical ways to mean. By noticing individual child-agendas at play, a freely-chosen and self-directed activity, Chris and I were able to trace consistent individual agendas throughout their literacy work. If Chris and I had worried that block play was inappropriate in first grade, or that watching block play had nothing to do with literacy, we would have missed vital connections to literacy.

For example, Mick, the principal case study boy, used block play time to figure out ways to make fiends, whereas,

Ed, a second case study boy, consistently built variations on the same theme, always improving, always critiquing. Similarly, in writing, Mick pursued the friendship theme, and Ed passionately wrote on a single topic for over three months. To miss and/or ignore Mick's persistent friendship issues or Ed's need for sustained focus on a topic would have stripped both boys of the reasons for their literate pursuits in first grade.

The art communities suggested new rules. Often the projects involved group work. Frequently, groups were intact table clusters instead of freely chosen like in block play, so girls were included more than in free play situations. When girls were a part of a group, they critiqued war themes, "Some girls don't like war stories." Boys in turn articulated their positions more fully. In effect, the art community stimulated talk of essences more than other communities. (Though I'd never suggest children's thoughts were less constructive, at other times, during art, they were inclined to articulate thoughts verbally.) I suspect that since few rules of any kind surrounded artmaking in 1G, and since many projects were collaborative, children took stabs at explaining to each other the many different things they were trying to do, things that frequently appeared more complex than the ones intended by the curriculum.

I would argue that children's different purposes --

especially ones that take shape as fairly consistent patterns of behavior--are prerequisites to their first grade school/literate success and signals to us that need be heeded.

"Child-centered" Can Be a Suspect Term

"Child-centered" can be an alias for a multitude of questionable practices and underlying philosophies. The closer I got to what children were trying to do at play, the more I thought about what distinguishes situations that are child-centered from those that profess to be. For example, some classrooms masquerade as child-centered by caricaturing child-like activities. Where whole curriculums are predetermined, in effect, they say, "DO THIS. LEARN THIS--but you can do it your way." Free play, cutsy worksheets, and cut-'n-paste doings lure tiny folk toward adult-centered concerns.

Other child-centered aliases manipulate children from an opposite angle. They formalize play routines to the extent they fizzle as play. They cajole, "Express yourself, learn what you want, but do it according to THE RULES: "Wait just a minute, we don't do that in the kitchen center." "No mixing the bristle blocks with the wooden ones. We are orderly in the block corner." "So you've decided to draw a pumpkin, Willy! ...Willy, stay inside the lines when you color your pumpkin. And remember Willy, we are quiet when

we color."

Until we notice and honor what concerns the child, and until we offer the child choice of ways to proceed--playfully disguised activities or play stripped of its essentials: initiative, imagination, and freedom--we are doing little more than sugar-coating adult agenda.

Chemists now make an artifical compound, "left-handed sugar," which is symmetrical to the natural compound, tastes the same, even cooks the same, but is not accepted by the body, not processed for nourishment. Ultimately, it's a fake. My experience suggests that kids know what's truly child-centered and what's fake in classroom practices. I particularly like Dyson's (1990, 197) term "child-created" in contrast to "child-centered" because it better guarantees child purposes.

Literacy Learning Is Systemic and Cooperative

Children coopt eclectic meaning-making systems to reach their expressive goals. They are natural transmediators. Children have yet to privilege one literacy over another, or to specialize. Everything counts for them.

In turn, new things need to count for us in watching them, appreciating their purposes, their resources, their literate progress. We need guard against artificially separating systems and inhibiting the child, like Chris was temporarily led to do when Mick's parents insisted she "come

down harder." His response to coming down harder was a backwards book, one he printed in mirror letters accidentally. I suspect that he was frustrated with limited meaning making resources. Instead of his functional repertoire of eclectic meaning-making -- sweeping his enviromnent for artifacts like watches, movable cardboard shapes that he'd construct and glue onto his story pages, for other children's help, print resources, and the like -- a sedentary verbal repertoire was imposed on him and it backfired.

The New Basics: Literate Sensibilities that Cut Across Meaning-Making Acts

The new basics suggest we offer children opportunities to be Problem Posers, Initiators, Problem Solvers, to explore levels of symbolic involvment in diverse forms. We need give them opportunities to respond to others, to ideas, to contexts, chances to "read situations," and to self-evaluate.

In turn, we'll begin to describe children in light of these sensibilites across contexts. We'll consider their meaning making gestures, their talk, work patterns and rhythms per community. Instead of a rush to evaluate their power over print, perhaps we'll privilege thinking, meaning making, expression and communication wherever, in whatever form(s) they occur. We'll ask them and ourselves, "What's

happening here? What are you trying to do? What's new?"

Even when we are suspicious that a child is simply imitating video game plots, for example, we need to discover the child's purposes. How powerfully I came to respect what I believed were skimpy, formulaic plots, once I appreciated the boys were invested in the action, in the middles, not beginnings and ends. It seemed that their intentions and ours were out of sync. Never did I talk with a child who did not have a purpose for what s/he was trying to do. Sometimes I urged a shift in purpose, more often, I shifted my own. Always, I needed to hang around long enough to eavesdrop and figure things out.

Questions about Literacy Ultimately Embrace Questions of Learning and Thinking

Playful Literacy is an attempt to credit children--at the very least--for what is visible about their thinking. This story is an external Notebooks of the Mind. In Notebooks of the Mind, Vera John-Steiner (1985) studied "experienced thinkers" and showed powerfully that while "inner speech--and 'inner speech' writing of the kind recorded in Virginia Woolf's diary--has been studied by others, condensed thought across several modalities had not been noted before" (215). Playful literacy, I hope, documents "condensed thought across several modalities" by first grade thinkers--who are not inexperienced thinkers,

nor "experienced thinkers"--just thinkers.

Relations of Power Surface in Any Educative Venture

Power relations confront any study, but particularly a study that admits to being advocacy. Questions arise: Whose meaning is it anyway? What constitutes curriculum? What is knowledge? Whose knowledge counts? Who is in power? Surely, knowledge is never neutral, but always connected to relations of power.

A driving question for me has been--Who owns access to what knowledge? Early in my data collection, I sent friends a letter describing my concerns. An excerpt follows from that December 1988 letter:

> Dear Chips and Harry,
>
> ...So, what specifically am I looking for? I am interested in what qualities constitute and contribute to literate behaviors. Most of the research I've read focuses on ways of talking, listening, reading, and writing. Surely, these behaviors are the most obvious, and those most directly associated with what we know as literacy. But, I am interested in expanding the notion of literacy so that we can value additional behaviors that I think may be even more fundamental. And surely, by arguing that more kinds of behaviors need be considered part of literacy, we open up more ways into

it--we offer a more democratic access to it.

I've been disappointed by what I think are limited conceptions of literate behavior--those that place verbocentric acts on pedastals and relegate non-verbal, or incidentally verbal acts to a lower intellectual domain. I'm continually amazed at the faith writing teachers have placed in brainstorming. The teacher invites the students to make lists of ideas, phrases, sentences, whole paragraphs, etc., in order to get writing going. In my experience, those who could use some prompts for writing are precisely those for whom words aren't forthcoming in any form! So, those that know how continue to succeed, and those who don't flounder and feel incompetent.

...What I'm struggling to suggest is that schools have limited the access to the literacy game by constructing narrow gates to the playing field. Only those who can fit through playing by verbal rules make it through successfully; others squeeze by or not, but in either case, see themselves as less capable early in the game and frequently lose ground evermore....

Research needs to challenge the status quo.

Above all, this study suggests the need to rethink what counts as "literacy." We need to develop artistic eyes in ourselves so that we see, value, and record those qualities

children exhibit at play, in talk, movement and artmaking, that may be transactive for growing literate capacities. It is these qualities that I would call "the new basics," more fundamental than the reverred ones of old.

Surely we share a vested interest in leading persons to words, but I'm worried about any literacy classroom or curriculum that privileges words at the expense of multiple forms for thinking. I worry: Who are we silencing by a narrow focus on words? How free is choice if choice fails to include different forms for meaning making?

Playful Literacy is offered as one section of the theoretical map qualitative researchers are piecing together in search for a GUT (grand unification theory, to plagiarize from physics!) for literacy learning. Hopefully, others will agree that our concept of early "literacy" needs to support and celebrate the child on all levels of meaning-making. This means we must ask, How many ways are available for this child to make meaning? before we ask, What does this child know?